R.C. Sherriff's *The Hopkins Manuscript* and Transformative Disaster Fiction

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Since the 1950s, depictions of post-apocalyptic survival have become common across most media platforms. The diversity of depictions of apocalyptic destruction, survival horror and entropic decay find their roots in early nineteenth century British literature. Indeed, since Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), British writers have engaged consistently with secular eschatology. The back to nature movement of the late 19th century popularized fictions of end times, but it is with H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898) that the form is incorporated into the scientific romance. Drawing on utopian traditions, modernist themes of entropy and decay, and socio-cultural concerns, a disaster tradition emerged within the burgeoning science fiction genre. The focus of such disaster narratives is survival amidst and beyond arduous post-apocalyptic conditions. Accordingly, R.C. Sherriff's 1939 novel *The Hopkins Manuscript*, which offers no such hope of survival at its conclusion, is a particularly significant text. The last British disaster novel written before World War II, Sherriff's work offers an analogue of contemporary politics by exploring the devastating potential of powerful leaders and nationalism through the depiction of two disasters: the Moon's collision with Earth and a consequent war.

Transformative Disaster Fiction

Before the steady growth in disaster fiction in Britain during the Cold War, several important works published between 1898 and 1939 established the generic tropes of the disaster/survival narrative. Such works, including M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt* (1913), J.J. Connington's *Nordenholt's Million* (1923), Sydney Fowler Wright's *Deluge* (1927) and *Dawn* (1929) and Sherriff's *The Hopkins Manuscript*, are the foundations of the disaster genre that emerged in a tumultuous post-war Britain. These early works are remarkable for their diversity – Britain, after all, changed a great deal between the end of the nineteenth century and World War II – and for their consistency. Each of the novels published before the war presents the post-cataclysmic environment in a way that suggests it is preferable to the civilization that has passed. Like the Biblical tales of Noah or Sodom and Gomorra, the pre-1939 works present cataclysm as a means of eradicating societal ills and starting afresh.

Before discussing the transition between works published pre- and post-World War II, and *The Hopkins Manuscript* particularly, it is worth considering the terminology surrounding disaster narratives. Critical discourse on the

subject has often presented an imprecise employment of the term 'disaster' to describe related but distinct works of catastrophe, apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, entropic or prophetic fiction. Indeed, there have been no attempts to distinguish between its various forms; notably, at the simplest level, those texts dealing with catastrophe and its immediate aftermath and post-apocalyptic fictions set some considerable time after the disaster. Such imprecision can be partly redressed, firstly, through a discussion of those disaster narratives explicitly featuring a catastrophic event (however briefly) and, secondly, by developing a terminology with which to discuss them. Furthermore, by focusing on a precise type of British disaster narrative it is possible to see the distinct shift in the tenor of disaster fiction published before World War II and those that followed in its wake.

The phrase 'transformative disaster fiction' allows a distinction to be made between disaster novels that explicitly involve a catastrophic event, and subsequently explore the transformation of society into a new post-cataclysmic structure, and other forms of catastrophe or apocalyptic fiction. Transformative disaster fiction describes works that range from 'transfigurative' disaster novels, which frame catastrophe as the source of positive transformations of society, to 'deteriorative' disaster novels that explore the negative transformation of contemporary society through catastrophe.

Before World War II the transfigurative disaster novel was the particular type of transformative text that dominated the form in Britain. Indeed, the transformative texts published were unanimously transfigurative, in that they each present a wish-fulfilment fantasy concerned with the correction or improvement of the pre-disaster society. In perceiving the fictional cataclysm as a means of positive cultural transformation, these transfigurative novels provide insights into the contemporary anxieties and dissatisfactions of the British contexts producing them and the nature of the wish fulfilment fantasies arising in response. *The Hopkins Manuscript* distinguishes itself from its predecessors as it presents a transfigurative cataclysm followed by a deteriorative catastrophe. As such, it anticipates the post-World War II movement away from transfigurative disasters towards more complex, pessimistic deteriorative scenarios, and thereby marks the end of a significant period in British disaster fiction.

Differentiating transformative disaster novels from the body of British disaster fiction is important since it enables the identification of a coherent group of texts that share specific narrative characteristics. These novels are distinguishable from other apocalyptic stories such as last-man narratives, which lack the post-cataclysmic rebirth in which transfigurative texts establish their wish fulfilment fantasies, and post-apocalyptic texts. These latter narratives which, like last-man stories, lack the defining wish fulfilment qualities of the transfigurative disaster novel, are set years or centuries after the catastrophe, and do not

concern themselves with the difficult processes of immediate post-disaster social reconstruction. Future war narratives, post-nuclear tales, narratives that feature some form of entropic decline, fictions of psychic disaster, or the inner-spatial 'transformation' narratives of J.G. Ballard, which unite both entropy and psychic disaster, can be considered 'disaster fiction', but they are all significantly different from one another and from transformative disaster stories.

Identifying a narratively cohesive group of texts is not simply a pragmatic way of ensuring critical coherence. Pre-war transfigurative disaster fiction provides the secular eschatology that lies at the root of much post-World War II transformative British science fiction, which is far more ambivalent in its attitude to cataclysm and its aftermath (a much broader spectrum of texts, from transfigurative to deteriorative narratives, appear after 1945). It is the literary predecessor of that branch of British sf which Brian Aldiss derogatively terms the 'cosy catastrophe' (Aldiss and Wingrove 2001: 279). Accordingly, to understand the nature of pre-war transformative disaster fiction is to obtain an insight into the historical origins and consistent conventions of one of the major forms of British science fiction. The key pre-World War II texts arose out of *fin-de-siècle* fears of decline and subsequent anxieties over social and cultural change in Britain between the wars and each novel's depiction of survival and restoration is a response, speculatively and politically, to contemporary British cultural fears. Thus, like utopian and anti-utopian writings, with which they have much in common, they explore the tensions existing between two defining impulses: anxiety and desire.

In depicting cataclysm as an opportunity for social change, a shifting landscape of cultural concerns can be observed. *The War of the Worlds* responds critically to apprehensions around Victorian complacency and fears of the British being superseded by more advanced military forces, while *The Purple Cloud* uses the catastrophe scenario to facilitate a rebirth that eliminates a 'corrupt' humanity. Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt* is more optimistic, and less apocalyptic, in its attitude to the necessity for cultural change. Only a reminder of human fragility, it argues, is required to provoke social transformation. Such optimism is absent from Connington's *Nordenholt's Million*, which presents a totalitarian drive towards efficiency and eugenics as the means of cultural modification. Rejecting modernity entirely, *Deluge* and *Dawn* use the catastrophe to emphasize the merits of a less technologized existence. While these novels clearly continue the trajectory of 'growing pessimism that accompanies the theme of progress from the very beginning of the [nineteenth] century' (Friedländer 1985: 61), taken collectively, they are united by their wish-fulfilment responses to an increasing disillusionment with contemporary conditions.

By presenting alternative social structures as wish fulfilment fantasies,

each text reinforced the contemporary dissatisfactions underpinning it. Indeed, it seems likely that the novels sought to provoke a cognitive reaction in their readers, who were encouraged to re-evaluate critically their cultural values, political situation and contemporary attitudes. Throughout the forty years following the publication of Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, concerns over increasing levels of pollution and squalor caused by industrialization resulted in fears over the health of the nation's population and intensified the evolutionary based fears regarding biological regression. These anxieties were compounded when confidence in British military superiority was damaged after the Boer War and, again, when World War I was not easily won (Gooch 2000: 206; Overy 2007: 42). The transfigurative British disaster novels that span this period are a symptomatic response to such declining confidence and, in many ways, seek to re-establish faith in the British evolutionary and cultural superiority that had existed in the nineteenth century.

To depict social change, transformative disaster fiction presents either 'return' or 'departure' scenarios following the disaster. Similarly, in presenting its emergent post-disaster societies as positive transformations, pre-war transfigurative disaster fiction falls into these 'return' / 'departure' categories. 'Returns' describe texts in which the pre-catastrophe society is reinstated and, in the transfigurative mode, is improved upon. *The War of the Worlds*, *The Poison Belt* and (the first part of) *The Hopkins Manuscript* are all 'returns' that advocate a post-disaster restoration of an amended British society. In these texts the cataclysm is the admonition of a complacent population and the works use the cataclysm to elicit a change which essentially turns back the clock, redressing imperialist anxieties and evoking former attitudes in the surviving population. By contrast, 'departures' describe those texts in which the post-catastrophe civilization is radically different from the pre-cataclysmic world. *The Purple Cloud*, *Nordenholt's Million*, *Deluge* and *Dawn* all fall into this category and depict the elimination of the pre-disaster society. These 'departures' halt the current trajectory of modernity by eradicating it entirely in favour of taking human civilizations in a new direction. Each novel destroys contemporary society to offer disjunctive wish fulfilment fantasies. Here disaster is not a warning regarding contemporary complacency; it functions to topple a civilization depicted as unworthy of saving. Each is an anti-democratic masculine power fantasy, expressing an overwhelming desire for control that perhaps reflects a sense of political impotence in the face of emancipation, modernity and technological change. *The Purple Cloud*, for example, presents its female characters, Clodagh and Leda, as manipulative figures; *Nordenholt's Million* emphasizes the strong leadership of Nordenholt, which contrasts with the characterization of Elsa (the only prominent female character in the novel) as illogical and emotional; and

in *Deluge* and *Dawn* the reassertion of masculine authority is fundamental to the transfigurative scenario. The texts present increasingly independent women negatively and call for a movement to a more primitive and patriarchal existence.

While all of these texts draw upon Social Darwinist ideas, 'returns' seek to redress Britain's perceived diminished power and restore the nation's implied former greatness while 'departures' use destruction as a positive, purgative event. In signifying their wish fulfilment fantasies through 'returns' and 'departures', transfigurative disaster narratives offer an appealing sense of continuance to readers. Accordingly, the satisfaction of reading these transfigurative disaster novels derives, in part, from the reassurance that the 'end of the world' is, in fact, the very opposite.

Although classifiable in two distinct categories, transfigurative disaster novels are unanimously optimistic. They present their post-cataclysmic civilizations as improvements on the author's contemporary environment. Such confidence begins to falter on the eve of World War II, however, when the transformative disaster ceases to be dominated by transfigurative texts. The final British disaster novel published before the war, *The Hopkins Manuscript*, illustrates this shift. The novel anticipates the movement that would occur in transformative disaster fiction after the war as it turned away from transfigurative narratives to assume a more ambivalent attitude towards the physical and psychological consequences of catastrophe.

A Janus-Faced Perspective: *The Hopkins Manuscript*

Written on the brink of World War II, Sherriff's *The Hopkins Manuscript* explores the devastating potential of powerful leaders and nationalism. Through its depiction of two disasters – the Moon's collision with Earth and a consequent war – *The Hopkins Manuscript* unites the idealism of the transfigurative novel in its 'return' mode with the radical shifts associated with 'departure' texts. However, the 'departure' in Sherriff's novel differs significantly from those that preceded it. It depicts the demise of western civilization and, for the first time, the living conditions for the protagonist are portrayed as being markedly worse after each cataclysm than before. Thus, *The Hopkins Manuscript* marks a significant change in the genre. Where previous texts had presented the cataclysm as an opportunity, *The Hopkins Manuscript* explores this only in the aftermath of the first cataclysm. With the second disaster, the novel adopts an unreservedly pessimistic deteriorative view of the post-catastrophe world.

The first cataclysmic event in Sherriff's novel involves the Moon's collision with Earth. It displaces the Atlantic Ocean, creating a landmass that links Europe with America. Despite the calamitous consequences of this, society is initially improved by the experience. However, a devastating war over the Moon's

territories and resources results in the demise of European civilization. The conclusion to this second event means that narratively *The Hopkins Manuscript* looks in two directions: after initially drawing upon the transfigurative fiction that preceded it, it introduces the deteriorative mode that will follow. Significantly, Aldiss describes it as a 'cosy catastrophe, much in the style that Wyndham was to adopt two decades later. It reads now as a gorgeous parody of all things British and thirties-ish' (Aldiss and Wingrove 2001: 278). While Aldiss's description indicates the novel's position within the British disaster mode, his interpretation fails to address the tonal shift that occurs between the two catastrophes. The assuredness of human survival amidst adversity following the moon's impact is undermined when the second disaster presents a cynical decline of western society's own making. As such, the final parts of the book are a self-reflexive expose of the naiveté of seeing positive social change emerge from a cataclysmic event. More broadly, the alteration in tone in the second half heralds the larger shift in British transformative disaster novels published after the war when such texts began increasingly to present bleaker post-apocalyptic environments.

Beyond these generic considerations, *The Hopkins Manuscript* is a witty, ironic work that develops its themes through rich characterization and increasingly nostalgic reflection. By rejecting plausibility in its depiction of the initial 'Moon catastrophe' the text announces itself as allegorical, establishing a series of analogies with British history. The pre-cataclysmic society represents pre-World War I Britain; the Moon's descent and collision with Earth is a metaphor for World War I; the post-cataclysmic rebuilding parallels the post-World War I period up to 1933; the discovery of riches on the Moon suggests the period after 1933, which was characterized by increasing tensions in Europe; and the subsequent war over territory and resources on the Moon anticipates the imagined devastating effects of a second world war. Embodying the optimism of earlier transfigurative texts, the Moon's impact initially draws nations and communities together in a spirit of mutual cooperation. However, once the Moon's mineral wealth and territorial possibilities are realized, the narrative highlights human avarice, national self-interest and political manipulation as opposing positive social transformation.

During and after the Moon's collision, widespread destruction is balanced with a local and global spirit of cooperation and collaboration. While the approach and impact of the Moon is a great source of anxiety and tragedy, it also draws people together in happiness at having 'something novel and valuable to do' (Sherriff 2005: 136). At the level of the individual, the narrator, Hopkins, secures a position for himself in a burgeoning community that means companionship and newfound significance. Indeed, the novel is careful to distinguish between

one's sense of importance (represented by the 'found artefacts' described in the novel's prologue and developed through Hopkins' haughtiness) and genuine usefulness through Hopkins' character trajectory. He spends the early parts of the novel imagining himself important while contributing little to his community. Later, his poultry breeding becomes an essential source of food for survivors of the cataclysm.

Locally, the disaster creates a cordial spirit amongst the community, who rally together in the face of imminent danger. Similar themes of collaboration and friendship amidst adversity were explored in Sherriff's earlier, more famous work, *Journey's End* (1929). This semi-autobiographical play, based on Sherriff's wartime experiences, is set in the trenches during World War I and develops the dual themes of camaraderie and tragedy. An analogous camaraderie is found in *The Hopkins Manuscript*, particularly in scenes where the inhabitants of the village of Beadle work together to build a dugout in preparation for the Moon's impact. This shelter unites the villagers during its construction, but it is the place where almost all of the population is killed. By depicting the same companionship during adversity as *Journey's End, The Hopkins Manuscript* makes explicit the parallels being drawn between the Moon's collision and World War I. The fact that Sherriff treats the events in Beadle in a way similar to those in *Journey's End* signals that, for Sherriff, World War I had, paradoxically, been both a traumatic and rewarding experience (Sherriff 1968: 131), much like the Moon collision for Hopkins.

Just as *Journey's End* provides an intimate insight into the personal experiences of war, Hopkins' narration of the events in Beadle provides a personal reflection on the fulfilment and pride of a community drawn together at a time of danger and fear. The understated bravery of the villagers is symptomatic of the celebration of human achievement that permeates the first part of the novel. It commends humanity's capacity to accomplish much when working cooperatively. Hence, the narrative's wish fulfilment fantasy is one of community, comradeship and equality. Nevertheless, the celebratory aspects of the text, which applaud united purpose and shared achievement, are tempered by the persistence of cultural norms that predate the cataclysm. Thus, unlike the disaster novels that precede it, *The Hopkins Manuscript* stresses that societal change is an uncertain and fragile process.

Problematizing the straightforward transfigurations of prior transformative texts, *The Hopkins Manuscript* draws attention to the difficulties of socio-cultural transformation. These are emphasized through Hopkins' response to his altered environment following the Moon's collision. He is a petty and self-important man able, largely, to put aside his flaws as the cataclysm approaches to work with his fellow residents on the Beadle dugout. While he achieves much fulfilment

working with his peers, and recognizes his greater happiness when part of a group, he is unable to accept such collective endeavours as a social norm outside of exceptional circumstances. Filled with a 'grand spirit' Hopkins notes, 'I was almost tempted to tell John Briggs, the carpenter, that my Christian name was Edgar. I decided upon reflection not to do so, for if nothing fatal happened on the 3rd of May he might fail to appreciate his duty to call me "sir" again' (Sherriff 2005: 136). The novel's satire is clear: the threat has unified the village, but social traditions and conservative attitudes threaten to break the union and cooperative spirit described. In this way, *The Hopkins Manuscript* laments that such collaboration is only likely under adverse conditions. It demonstrates little faith in the longevity or permanence of transfiguration, an assumption that had been key to the transformative disaster narrative previously. Preparing for the Moon's impact realizes a 'bond of comradeship' (136) that is unlikely to permanently displace the former class distinctions that threaten to reassert themselves once the crisis has passed.

Building upon the community and sense of fulfilment fostered by the Moon's descent, a 'golden age' follows the cataclysm. Society is reconstructed with a new emphasis on the collaboration and companionship that emerged pre-disaster. In contrast to the harsh realities of inter-war Britain, the massive loss of life here leads to social and cultural transfiguration. Hopkins imagines the post-cataclysm society will be an altered one where the general quality of life is improved. He tells his fellow survivors Robin and Pat that although they have suffered, 'we shall have reward [...]. Before you are old you may be living in a world much finer than any you would have known if this...cataclysm had not come to us' (266). Hopkins even imagines the future in utopian terms. He envisions 'fresh air – warm, friendly houses – peace – purpose – happiness' (360). This vision – the result of the hard work on the part of the survivors – provides a positive outcome for tragedy. Had *The Hopkins Manuscript* concluded here, it would have aligned itself with prior transfigurative texts. However, the novel interrogates its subject matter with greater scepticism than its antecedents.

Although the future Hopkins envisions seems perfectly possible, it is quashed by global events. Like post-World War I Britain, the novel's post-impact society provides an opportunity for recovery and improvement. Hopkins explains that the cataclysm 'was terrible. But it was almost worthwhile to have achieved this wonderful spirit of friendship and helpfulness between nations' (336). Over time, however, this 'wonderful spirit' is lost as the novel captures post-war disenchantment with the possibility of genuine collective improvement. As historian Richard Overy explains, the period after World War I was filled with expectations about the 'restoration of social peace' (Overy 2008: 92). However, 'against this weight of idealism and illusion, the reality [...] was a

grave disappointment. Social unrest, economic stagnation and political conflict were measured against the hopes of peace abroad and stability of the whole, and found sadly wanting' (Overy 2007: 42). Overy observes that this culminated in a 'sense of loss – of innocence, of moral certainty, of social values, of cultural confidence' (Overy 2008: 42). By presenting an idealized England of reformed social values and renewed cultural confidence in the aftermath of catastrophe, *The Hopkins Manuscript* realizes the transfigurative possibilities that were never historically achieved. By presenting a fantasy of what *could-have-been*, the novel draws attention to the contemporary conditions in Britain that might lead disenchanted authors to see catastrophe as the only means of social progress. Such a fantasy also deepens the text's later ironic reflection on the improbability of social change, even after a cataclysm.

Following the Moon's collision, the novel suggests that while post-cataclysm society is ostensibly more egalitarian, individual perceptions are slow to change. Typical of the novel's ironic tone, this is indicated through Hopkins' social interactions. During a celebratory lunch for survivors he comments that 'everybody had a place at the table: everybody an important job – none were useless – none were unemployed. Distinctions of class were gone forever, and I sat with Mrs Smithson, the wife of a plumber, and Mrs Bingham of the drapery store talking to them almost as if they were my equals' (Sherriff 2005: 359-60). Unaware of his ingrained prejudices, he can only perceive the wives of a tradesman and a shopkeeper as '*almost*' his equals, suggesting that social transformation may be superficial and transient rather than genuine and enduring.

Analogously, although the threat posed by the Moon draws nations together, their cooperation is tenuous. Just as Hopkins is unable to see his fellow villagers as equals, so, it is revealed, each nation views its neighbours as less important. Their spirit of mutual cooperation is exposed as both shallow and fragile, existing only under exceptional conditions. Once the Moon has crashed to Earth, old antipathies resurface in the light of the new mineral wealth. In this way, the narrative events recall interwar unrest. Just as the war 'inflamed long-standing rivalries and confirmed old hatreds' (Sharpe et al 2002: 530) rather than ushering in a lasting peace, so the Moon, which had initially fostered global goodwill, becomes the source of international conflict. The discovery of rich deposits on its surface causes former tensions to re-emerge as each nation lays claim to a share.

This drive for new resources and territories, and the shift from potential peace to international conflict is, overtly, the textual equivalent of changes in international relations during the interwar period. As Norman Lowe explains, before January 1933 there seemed a good chance world peace could be

maintained; afterwards, however, all hope was gone (Lowe 1997: 207). Read in the light of this historical turning point, the idealized peacetime of *The Hopkins Manuscript* – before the discovery of minerals on the Moon – represents the brief period of peace between 1918 and 1933. It is shattered by the rise of nationalism and materialist competition between the European powers. Thus, the collegial spirit that emerges during the wish fulfilment opening section of the novel is displaced in the second half by a sense of distrust and national self-interest that leads to war. The growing momentum towards European annihilation in the latter part of the text expresses the sense of impending disaster that accompanied the approach of World War II. *The Hopkins Manuscript*'s change in tone reflects the dwindling optimism between the wars as those in Britain realized that World War I was not, after all, the war to end all wars.

The parallels drawn by *The Hopkins Manuscript* between its fictional events and the global political situation pre- and post-1933 are explicit. After the Moon's collision, the 'United States of Europe' (Sherriff 2005: 332) is created in a clear equivalent to the formal establishment of the League of Nations in 1920, supposedly symbolizing a new era of peace (Lowe 1997: 97). However, in the novel each nation 'demands a bigger slice [of the Moon]' (Sherriff 2005: 345). As a result, each country's claims to the Moon are coupled with a suspicion of other nations, especially the British who, in a manner akin to Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, initially try to broker peace. The resultant fracturing of a tentatively united Europe, the rise of territorial and economic disputes, and increasing global tensions parallel the 'disagreements over territorial demands, material compensation, and the conditions needed for future security' (Sharpe et al 2002: 532) that threatened to break the League of Nations in the interwar years.

The battle for territory and wealth in *The Hopkins Manuscript* is a clear reference to interwar global events and the threat to peace and stability they posed. Thus, *The Hopkins Manuscript* does not consider interwar unrest as an opportunity for social restructuring, as did *Nordenholt's Million* and *Deluge* and *Dawn*. This may be because it is the only transformative disaster novel written after 1933, when the interwar mood had shifted in the light of increasing global tensions. The events that culminate in the outbreak of war in the text are therefore informed by the European economic context of international distrust and the failure of the League of Nations.

Developing the novel's irony, Hopkins explains that 'the moon contains minerals sufficient to give wealth to this world undreamed of' (Sherriff 2005: 339). Hence, the initial cataclysm's potential to be a catalyst for positive change and international peace has, the text asserts, been wasted. As the narrative reaches its climax, Hopkins' declaration is revealed as naive. Indeed, the novel

self-consciously signals this naiveté when Major Jagger, an intellectual who becomes Prime Minister, reflects upon events and asks Hopkins, 'do you imagine a cataclysm – or one hundred cataclysms – can change human nature?' (337). Jagger's question seems to contradict what Michael Moorcock sees as Sherriff's recognition of 'the inherent decency of ordinary people caught up in events which they neither wanted – nor [...] engineered'. Whilst Moorcock asserts that Sherriff never lost his 'optimistic belief in human decency' (Moorcock 2005: xi), the text offers a more complex representation of 'human nature' than this.

When Jagger later affirms that 'the cataclysm has not altered human nature' (Sherriff 2005: 345), he consolidates the novel's suggestion that self-importance and self-interest can undermine prosperity. In the aftermath of the Moon's collision, manipulative political leaders rise to exploit and extend this sense of self-importance into nationalism. The positive representations of autocratic leadership found previously in inter-war transformative texts such as *Nordenholt's Million* and *Deluge* are not present in *The Hopkins Manuscript*. Rather, the novel depicts the newly established post-cataclysm governments as encouraging their populations' worst characteristics. Unlike its antecedents, *The Hopkins Manuscript* indicates that those leaders who attain power following a cataclysm are not necessarily going to change society for the better. Indeed, the political leaders that become prominent following the Moon's collision are characterized as power hungry scaremongers whose political decisions affect their populations in wholly negative ways.

It is here that the novel's political position is most explicit. In a clear allusion to the emergence of dictators in Europe after World War I (including Mussolini, Franco and Hitler), Hopkins observes that following the discovery of riches on the Moon there arose a 'horrid swarm of political upstarts' (351). Where *Nordenholt's Million* and *Deluge* and *Dawn* presented post-catastrophe restructuring from the perspective of new post-disaster leaders, *The Hopkins Manuscript*'s focus on the experiences of the common man shows the effects such leadership has on the population. This contrast in perspective both emphasizes and dramatizes the devastating effects of autocratic leadership on individuals. Hopkins' powerlessness and his frustration at these 'upstarts' is a consequence of their disruption of the fragile new communities emerging across Europe after the impact. He explains that these new leaders are:

> nasty creatures [who] would swoop down upon peaceful, hard-working communities, upon people intent only upon rebuilding their shattered fortunes and living in quiet happiness. With clever, impassioned speeches they declared that their cowardly Governments were allowing other countries to seize the lion's share of the moon's wealth. They frightened bewildered people into believing that if they did not arouse themselves and 'stand up for the rights of their country' they would soon be living in poverty, slaves to a foreign power. (351–52)

The allusion to 'new leaders [who have] risen abroad' (365) – and in Britain in the character of Major Jagger – makes the novel's anti-authoritarian, anti-nationalist and anti-war stance overt. This is no *Nordenholt's Million*, *Deluge*, or *Dawn*, presenting the benefits of dictatorship. Rather, *The Hopkins Manuscript* views authoritarianism negatively and, by extension, can be read as a critical comment on the political direction of Europe between the wars.

Fittingly, Hopkins' emotional response to the approaching war is one of despair. He tries to find 'the spark of new adventure' but notes that 'it was useless. I had survived the cataclysm: by super-human endeavour I rebuilt my life. It was too much to ask of any man that he should face a second ruin and rebuild again' (348–49). Hopkins' weary despondency establishes the mood of a war-weary Britain, a country whose hope for a new 'golden age' has been ruined by political disagreements and national self-interests. As the war for resources develops, it consumes all the existing assets required for rebuilding. Hopkins' reaction suggests the increasing sense of pessimism associated with the novel's context. As Overy points out, Britain, France and Germany 'believed that the next war, if it came, would be the total war, a long war that required the mobilisation of the nation's entire military and moral resources' (Overy 2008: 48). Given this expectation of a long and arduous clash, it is hardly surprising that *The Hopkins Manuscript* offers a vision of a total and devastating war, for Europe at least. Conflict is presented as catastrophe. By fighting amongst themselves, the European powers become vulnerable to an invasion from the East. As each nation uses every provision to attain resources from the Moon, 'The Eastern Menace' (Sherriff 2005: 408) destroys a weakened Europe. Hopkins laments that '"if Europe had remained united we could have scattered them to the winds...." I was past all anger now' (409). His tired, melancholic reflection reads as a final plea for a united Europe. The novel's overall despondency culminates in Hopkins' death. His demise, stemming from a loss of hope, is a metaphor for the downfall of Europe. He notes: 'I was living [...] in a fantasy of dreams that had no further kinship with this earthly world. "It need never have happened"', he says sadly (409). His reflection suggests not only the hopelessness of Europe's position but also the fact that such a catastrophe could have been avoided.

From the perspective of genre, the movement from post-cataclysmic hope for the future to wartime despair within the novel's storyworld renders the text Janus-faced. The optimism expressed in the aftermath of the Moon's collision with the Earth looks back to the wish fulfilment fantasies that had hitherto defined 'return' transfigurative narratives. By exposing this uncomplicatedly

optimistic position, *The Hopkins Manuscript* can be read as a product of a loss of innocence within the British disaster tradition more generally, something that would develop considerably after World War II. The text's ultimate pessimism emphasizes the fantasy inherent in such optimistic transfigurative disaster novels. This pessimism also marks *The Hopkins Manuscript* as a deteriorative 'departure' narrative, a status confirmed by its vision of Europe superseded by the East. For this reason, the novel holds a historically significant position; it was the first of its type to view disaster as a wholly negative occurrence.

Pre-World War II transfigurative novels had portrayed cultural disenchantments before fictionally preparing the way for a different world. Although ideologically distinct, each presented a critique of its socio-political milieu and framed a cataclysmic event as an opportunity for social and cultural rebirth. Politically, the novels offered alternate futures that challenged the established norms of their contemporary social context. Thus, while structurally the form of the transfigurative disaster novel remained largely consistent, the nature of the cultural transformation achieved in each text depended upon individual responses to shifting social, cultural and political anxieties. Although their optimism is presented as simplistic in *The Hopkins' Manuscript*, the diversity of the narratives and their ideological positions highlights transformative disaster fiction's capacity for reinvention, a factor that has contributed to the mode's longevity.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of World War II many British transformative disaster novels embraced the pessimism of *The Hopkins Manuscript*'s deteriorative narrative. Between its transfigurative and deteriorative poles, the British transformative disaster novel diversified significantly. On occasion, transfigurative and deteriorative elements exist within the same text. John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), for example, balances the negative view of a deteriorative 'World Narrowing' (Chapter Fifteen) with the potentially positive prospects of a transfigurative 'Strategic Withdrawal' (Chapter Seventeen). Such ambivalence, which is more apparent in John Christopher's transformative catastrophes, can be seen, in part, as a loss of faith in what Sherriff terms 'human nature' following World War II. Additionally, the proliferation of new anxieties arising from the Cold War, military and civil nuclear threats, environmental failures, pollution, overpopulation, declining natural resources, and technological and scientific advancements (Bourke 2005: 259) contributed to an uncertainty over how a catastrophe – human-wrought or natural – could be survived. Nevertheless, these more ambivalent transformative texts, even in their deteriorative mode, often contain a wish fulfilment element through their emphasis on survival as

compensation for mass death and destruction.

As the twentieth century progressed, several critics noted that there was a movement towards the deteriorative end of the transformative spectrum that has continued into the new millennium and beyond. Increasingly, survival stories, dystopian worlds, and tales of total annihilation have grown in popularity, particularly as the form's links to the horror genre developed following the 1980s. As Krishan Kumar has observed, the contemporary apocalypse is often missing the sense of hope of something constructive emerging from the ruins (Kumar 1995: 205). For James Berger the increasingly pessimistic tone of apocalyptic fiction arose from the fact that 'in the late twentieth century the unimaginable, the unspeakable, has already happened, and continues to happen' (Berger 1999: 42). Visions of catastrophe, accompanied by the sense that there are always new and additional sources of potential disaster, are dominated by what Frank Kermode calls the 'mood of end-dominated crisis' (Kermode 1967: 98). Joanna Bourke outlines the sources of this mood when she points out the nebulous and global nature of modern sources of threat (from cancer, to crime and pollution), which are isolating and difficult to avoid (Bourke 2005: 293).

The sense of immediacy – the feeling that catastrophe may be around any corner – reached new heights as the millennium approached. The popular media increasingly provided real-world alternatives to popular narratives of impending disaster. Striving for sensationalism, it has fuelled the general feeling that contemporary civilization could be on the brink of collapse. Nuclear threats, chemical warfare, the millennium bug, SARS, CJD, global warming, declining natural resources, super volcanoes, asteroids, terrorism, pandemics and nationalism have each been presented as sources of humankind's possible downfall. While culturally this state of perpetual crisis is established and re-established, the disaster genre proliferated in both Britain and America as it responded to anxieties informing the modern cultural landscape. At its core, the transformative disaster text has always been, and remains, one of the clearest expressions of the fragility of human civilization and of the primary source of speculations regarding the nature and possibilities of what may follow its destruction.

Endnote

[1]Cicely Hamilton's modernist future war novel *Theodore Savage* (1922) treats disaster with greater complexity. Taking a long view of history, the novel is a sustained examination of post-war hardship, myth and rebuilding. However, it considers disaster as part of a cycle of the rises and falls of human civilization, a viewpoint emphasized in its subtitle, *A Story of the Past or the Future*. This cyclicity distinguishes the text from those examined in this article.

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